

## **On Immigration, Bush Seeks 'Middle Ground'**

President to Send 6,000 Guard Troops to Mexican Border

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President Bush said last night that he will dispatch 6,000 National Guard troops starting next month to help secure the porous U.S.-Mexican border, calling on a divided Congress and country to find "a rational middle ground" on immigration that includes providing millions of illegal workers a new route to citizenship.

In a rare prime-time speech from the Oval Office, Bush said the nation must move immediately to stanch the flow of illegal immigrants from its southern border by sending in the National Guard to free up U.S. Border Patrol agents in Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas. The Guard troops will provide intelligence, surveillance and logistical assistance over the next two years -- not armed law enforcement.

"We do not yet have full control of the border, and I am determined to change that," Bush said. He also called on Congress to end the U.S. practice of releasing into the country tens of thousands of people caught illegally crossing the southern border because officials lack the jail space or legal authority to detain them or send them home. He said every foreign worker should be required to hold a high-tech, tamper-proof identification card so U.S. companies could determine whether their employees are legal.

For the first time in a public forum, Bush endorsed new procedures that would give illegal immigrants who have lived here for an extended time preferred status in obtaining citizenship. To qualify, workers would have to pay a fine and back taxes and would have to learn English and meet other requirements, he said.

The speech -- with its balance of security measures and pleas for tolerance -- comes as Bush is trying to revive his presidency and salvage an immigration deal in Congress before the midterm elections. The president's focus on border control last night was aimed at mollifying conservative Republican lawmakers and disgruntled voters, who have accused him of paying insufficient attention to tightening the border and enforcing immigration laws. Bush said his goal is to help lawmakers forge a bipartisan compromise this year to change how the United States deals with illegal immigration and the pressing need for foreign workers.

"All elements of this problem must be addressed together -- or none of them will be solved at all," he said.

With the Senate set to debate the largest overhaul of immigration laws in decades, Bush did not specifically address what many Republican lawmakers consider the most politically explosive and intractable issue confronting the country: what to do with most of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants living in the United States today.

In conversations with lawmakers earlier in the day, White House Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove made it clear that Bush supports, in principle, a Senate-backed plan that would provide immigrants who have lived here for five or more years a clear path to citizenship if they pay a penalty, according to participants. Under that plan, which Rove

called "intriguing," those who have been here two to five years would have to report to a border crossing, receive a temporary work visa and then apply for a green card. Those here less than two years would have to leave. But Rove made it clear the White House is open to compromise on how this tiered system would be structured, said [Rep. Jack Kingston](#) (R-Ga.), who participated in the private briefings.

Bush said: "There is a rational middle ground between granting an automatic path to citizenship for every illegal immigrant and a program of mass deportation. That middle ground recognizes that there are differences between an illegal immigrant who crossed the border recently and someone who has worked here for many years and has a home, a family and an otherwise clean record."

But the Republican-controlled House so far has been hostile to the emerging Bush plan. Conservatives in that chamber are pushing for legislation that would tighten the borders but would not allow any route to citizenship that does not require first leaving the country. House Republicans recently passed legislation to spend \$2.2 billion on five double-layered border fences in California and Arizona, stretching nearly 700 miles. The House would also make felons of any undocumented worker in the country today and would make illegal any activity to support such workers, such as smuggling as well as church-based sheltering. After the speech, House Majority Leader [John A. Boehner](#) (R-Ohio) said in a statement that he remains committed to making "border security our first priority." He and many others pointedly did not praise the path-to-citizenship plan.

Bush's plan to dispatch National Guard troops is the newest twist in the debate, and one that is likely to dominate discussions over immigration reform during the next week.

Even before Bush's speech, Senate Budget Committee Chairman [Judd Gregg](#) (R-N.H.) questioned not only how the plan would work but also how it would be funded. He said it would cost at least \$2 billion to deploy the additional troops and rejected the White House idea to pay for it with \$1.9 billion in border security funding that the Senate passed as part of a new emergency spending bill for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. White House officials said it is unclear how much the program would cost.

Under the White House plan, Bush would move National Guard troops from other states to Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas to meet each governor's specific needs. The federal government would cover the cost, but the governors would control the new troops.

The troops would serve along the border as part of their regular training deployment, which typically lasts two or three weeks, and then rotate out. This means as many as 156,000 of the nation's 400,000-plus Guard members could participate in the border-enforcement program over the next two years, when Bush plans to end Guard assistance, said Frances Fragos Townsend, Bush's homeland security adviser. These troops would fill specific assignments, such as intelligence duties, to relieve pressure on Border Patrol agents and increase law enforcement presence along the border. Some critics say the troops will have too little time to learn their duties without disrupting ongoing Border Patrol operations.

[Sen. Chuck Hagel](#) (R-Neb.) and other lawmakers have also raised concern that the Guard is already stretched too thin by deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan and should not be burdened with border security. Said [Rep. Ike Skelton](#) (D-Mo.): "We must not shift the burden from this lack of homeland security planning to our nation's military. Doing so could jeopardize the recruitment and retention of our National Guard forces."

White House officials said no more than 2 percent of the Guard will be assisting border agents at any time. "We have enough Guard forces to win the war on terror, respond to natural disasters and help secure our border," Bush said.

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano (D) broke ranks with neighboring governors Bill Richardson (D) of New Mexico and Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) of California in applauding the use of Guard troops on a temporary basis, an idea she said she had raised with the Pentagon months ago. But she said that step alone is not a solution without comprehensive legislation. "You've just put on a Band-Aid and not much more than that," she said.

Bush said the troops will help fill gaps until more Border Patrol agents are hired. The overall aim, said White House officials, is to help double to 18,000 the number of border agents by the time Bush leaves office.

The president also wants Congress to approve \$327 million to end what some call the "catch and release" program. The money would help cover the cost of 4,000 additional beds at detention centers this year and should be paid for with money already allocated by the Senate for emergency border security measures, Townsend said.

Leaders of the National Capital Immigration Coalition who gathered to watch the speech railed against proposals that they said would divide immigrant families and fail to provide an orderly path for future immigrants to seek permanent work in the United States. They said they were especially disturbed by the prospect of thousands of Guard troops on the border, which Jaime Contreras, chairman of the coalition, said would send the message that "immigrants are the number one enemy of this country."

Bush appealed for "a reasoned and respectful tone" for the debate: "Feelings run deep on this issue -- and as we work it out, all of us need to keep some things in mind. We cannot build a unified country by inciting people to anger, or playing on anyone's fears, or exploiting the issue of immigration for political gain."